

COMMENTARY

by Eugene Garfield

Hillary Clinton And Mary Lasker: A Photo In Proper Focus



The front page of *The Scientist's* October 18 issue was graced by a photograph of two remarkable women: Hillary Rodham Clinton together with Mary Lasker. The photo accompanied our coverage of the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation awards, given to three scientists—Günter Blobel, Donald Metcalf, and Nancy Wexler—whose outstanding efforts in basic research over the years are likely to yield, directly or indirectly, significant

gains in human health.

To my knowledge, no other national publication ran a photo of these two women, bonded as they were at an event underscoring the increasingly important link between biomedical investigation and social enrichment. Since she and her husband moved into the White House last January, Clinton has gained sharp visibility for her advocacy of a new and equitable system for ensuring the good health of all Americans; for the past half-century, the Lasker Foundation has been foremost among United States organizations honoring researchers whose work ultimately is directed toward the same estimable goal.

The support of basic research is fundamental to the well-being of our society, and an event like the Lasker Awards ceremony makes for, in our opinion, compelling front-page news. I find it troublesome to think that such publications as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* would opt to bury coverage of it in their back pages and ignore the symbolism of Clinton and Lasker's encounter. This is a moment in history, after all, when the nation's scientific community is struggling to produce, through the endeavors of basic research, remedies for AIDS, cancer, and other diseases—and while, ironically, federal support for untargeted laboratory investigation is persistently threatened.

Let us hope that Clinton's appearance at the Lasker Awards gathering signifies an implicit endorsement of basic research. Although I've been

a guest at many of the Lasker ceremonies over the years, I was not present at the recent ceremony. However, *The Scientist's* managing editor, Barbara Spector, did attend, and her report on the event is heartening in this respect.

In her article ("Lasker Awards Celebrate Biomedical Scientists For Their Advances In Health-Related Research," *The Scientist*, Oct. 18, 1993, page 1), Spector quotes Clinton as saying in her keynote speech: "These winners join a remarkable group . . . men and women whose work has found cures for disease, who have aided the kind of breakthroughs that we've only been able to dream about in the past but now take for granted. . . . This is a time when the past and the present in medical research join together to point us to a new future." To me, this sounds like a strong endorsement indeed!

Today, basic research and National Institutes of Health funding have become big, bureaucratic matters, not easily susceptible to influence by a single individual like Mary Lasker. But her pioneering advocacy efforts are being carried on by dozens of lobbying groups—such as Research!America—that remind Congress regularly of the high priority that medical research holds, or should hold, for most Americans.

Nearly 20 years ago, I proposed in an essay (*Current Contents*, Jan. 23, 1974, pages 10-12) that Congress establish a National Institute for Preventive Medicine. I wrote: "With the energy crisis upon us, and the 'crisis management' reaction to it, most physical and chemical scientists can look forward to another decade of generous funding. So be it; but we must make certain that it is not accomplished by sacrificing the biomedical research effort because it is now politically popular to support energy, environmental, or other forms of research."

It is discouraging that Congress or NIH has still not elevated preventive medicine—and the research activity that goes with it—to that status. On the other hand, it is heartening to see such diverse personalities as Hillary Rodham Clinton and Mary Lasker united in recognizing the value and immense importance of the nation's basic research community.

The picture of them, together, is pertinent; let's hope that the prospect for basic research is as inspiring.